



The Force Is With Us...

... at last. After resisting the pressure to release any of his *Star Wars* movies to DVD without that personal touch, George Lucas gives us an extras-packed Episode I. What DVD gets a rare meeting with the man himself.

WORDS: JAMES COTTEE

↓ VITAL STATS

STAR WARS: EPISODE ONE



SYNOPSIS In a galaxy far, far away, the beginning of the *Star Wars* epic is about to begin ... When the evil Trade Federation cracks a plot to invade the peaceful planet of Naboo, Jedi warrior Qui-Gon Jinn and his apprentice Obi-Wan Kenobi set out upon an adventure to save the planet. Along the way they join forces with young queen Amidala, Gungan outcast Jar Jar Binks, and the powerful Captain Panaka, who will all travel to the faraway planets of Tatooine and Coruscant in an attempt to save their world from Darth Sidious, leader of the Trade Federation, and Darth Maul, the strongest Dark Lord of the Sith.

ON SALE October 17, 2001

RRP \$44.95 **RATING** PG

STARRING Ewan McGregor (*Trainspotting*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Little Voice*), Liam Neeson (*Michael Collins*, *Schindler's List*), Natalie Portman (*Mars Attacks!*, *Everyone Says I Love You*), Jake Lloyd (*Jingle All the Way*)

DIRECTOR George Lucas (*Star Wars*, *Empire Strikes Back*, *Return of the Jedi*, *American Graffiti*)

PRODUCER Rick McCallum (*Star Wars*, *Empire Strikes Back*, *Return of the Jedi*)

CINEMATOGRAPHER David Tattersall (*Vertical Limit*, *Wind in the Willows*)

WRITERS George Lucas

MUSIC John Williams (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *E.T.*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*)

DVD HIGHLIGHTS

Deleted scenes, 12-part web documentary, *Making Of* doco, director's commentary, gallery of never-before-seen production shots, original theatrical trailers, TV spots.

Movie crazes come and go, but the one that just keeps getting bigger every year is *Star Wars*. Even when the next film in the series isn't due for months or years, the Internet is choked with rumours, speculation and unbridled hype. We all know at an intellectual level that they're just silly action romps but deep down we love the films to bits.

Spawning books, comics and every collectible imaginable, it's gone beyond pulp fiction to become the definitive modern mythology. An atheist may not buy that Christ died on the cross for our sins, but he'll hold up the corruption and redemption of Anakin Skywalker as a moral fable we should all observe.

It's a mystique that even penetrates the blasé public façades held up by A-list actors. Samuel L Jackson may have breezed through the role of *Shaft*, but *Star Wars* was on a whole other level. Becoming Mace Windu for Episode I was akin to a religious experience.

"It was pretty amazing to walk into my dressing room and there was my Jedi outfit. As I put each item on, I felt more and more part of it ... It was all a great and awesome thing!"

Taking on the role of the Sith Lord Darth Maul was the first big acting break for martial arts expert Ray Park, and he was even more humbled by the experience.

"I remember my dad taking me to the cinema to see *Star Wars* being shown back to back with *The Empire Strikes Back*. I





"Whoosh! Wh

DID YOU KNOW?

■ A pod from the Discovery in 2001: A Space Odyssey can be seen in the background of Watto's junkyard.

→ loved it. I even had a plastic light saber. When I first saw myself as Darth Maul, I was like a big kid, really excited ... I thought: 'That's me on the screen, that's me! That's me!'"

As the writer, director and producer behind all the *Star Wars* films, George Lucas is as aware as anyone of the cultural impact of his magnum opus. But with financial success has come the power to see his dream fully realised, and his vision for *Star Wars* is as vivid as ever.

In DVD, he has found a chance to present his whole vision, and his enthusiasm for the medium is shown through his willingness to open up the

Skywalker Ranch to the press. During what must have been countless interviews, an chirpy George explains his DVD philosophy - and it starts with giving us all value for money.

"What you're trying to do is give the people that buy the DVD the best possible experience. I want somebody to feel that they got their money's worth when they buy this thing," says now legendary Lucas.

The Phantom Menace on DVD, along with almost all of the extras, is presented in full widescreen. Lucas is a fan of the 16:9

aspect ratio, and wanted to preserve this for the DVD market.

"I am a firm believer that the films should be shown in the way that they were intended. The design of the film and the framing and everything as you know are very important. I look at the DVD as the highest quality version of the film that's going to be continuously in the marketplace so I want it to be the best possible way to see the film."

The scenes that Lucas forced himself to cut from *Episode I* were fully completed and restored for the DVD release. It's a new way to preserve these fragments of the story, and we can expect *Episodes II* and *III* to get a similar treatment.

"One real advantage of DVDs is that it makes cutting the film a little less painful. For a filmmaker it's always hard to cut material out that you want to have in there, but it just isn't appropriate for the running time of the film and everything else. So this gives you a chance to say that work and energy and everything that went into this scene is not going to be lost."

Sweeping the cutting room floor

The deleted scenes that were restored for the DVD benefited both from retrospective and the way technology has improved since the film was first shot. This didn't stop it being a mammoth undertaking, though.

"Some of the scenes took quite a while. You just don't go out and say 'OK, we'll just cut these we'll put them on the DVD.' The process of committing the funds and the talent and all the people involved to actually finish scenes that were cut out of the movie, is kind of a big deal. Because they aren't finished and then you cut them in, as you probably already realise that they get cut out pretty early in the process, and then they finish them. That was like a nine month process I think just to finish those scenes off."

Digital film expands every possibility of film making, but this flexibility comes at a price. According to Lucas, the price is hard work.

"On one hand it makes the technical side of it much easier. And in terms of allowing →

↓ PHANTOM FACTS



■ *The Phantom Menace* is the second highest grossing film of all time.

■ The video of *The Phantom Menace* shifted approximately 5 million units in 48 hours, generating more than \$100 (US) million revenue.

■ Jar Jar Binks was the first wholly computer-generated character to appear in a live action movie. Unfortunately,

■ The sets for *The Phantom Menace* were only built to head-height, the remaining detail being filled in by computer graphics. But Liam Neeson is so tall, he cost the producers an extra \$150,000 (US).

■ *The Phantom Menace* was the first film to be recorded in Dolby Digital Surround EX.

■ The budget for *The Phantom Menace* was \$115 (US) million.

■ Jabba the Hut is credited as having played "Himself" in the movie.

■ In the Senate scenes, a group of aliens resembling ET can clearly be seen.

■ The Queen's throne room took eight weeks to design.

■ Ewan McGregor is the nephew of Denis Lawson, who played X-Wing pilot Wedge in the original *Star Wars* trilogy.

Back at the ranch

It's not every day an invitation to George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch lands on the What DVD doormat. Steve Palopoli gratefully accepted ...

"IT'S DEAD QUIET AS I PULL OFF A

BACKWOODS ROAD, MILES AWAY FROM A freeway that wasn't going anywhere notable anyway. You can't help but expect some kind of super-high-tech industrial complex, but in reality, Skywalker Ranch sits on 6,000 acres of open land owned by Lucas, most of which will never be built on.

It's ironic: when Lucasfilm first planned to build its headquarters here, some of the neighbours were up in arms, probably imagining they were about to get a Death Star in their backyard. Instead, Lucas has built on only a very small part of the area, and with a pledge to preserve most of the land. So those same neighbours probably now think that the cute little bearded guy is the best thing that could

have happened to this place.

Driving in past grapevines and wooden fences, it really is like I've stumbled into the eye of the storm that is the *Star Wars* phenomenon. The loudest noise seems to be my wheels on the dirt road. Even as I drive up to the buildings, it's like the whole place is encased in some kind of invisible soundproofing, and – in classic *Twilight Zone* fashion – I'm soon wondering if anyone's here.

Ah, but not to worry. There are 300 people who work at Skywalker Ranch. The place is so big and so remote that in some ways it is in its own self-contained world, with its own fire station, day care centre, four restaurants, five acres of vineyard, a solarium, a two-storey research library, and more. But as I walk up to the heart of the place, all I see are old buildings and the

occasional geeky-looking mountain biker.

If you've ever heard Lucas talk about how he "makes movies to build buildings," I'm looking right at the proof. The little complex of "offices" are built in the Queen Ann Victorian style of the 1860s (*That'll be made-up American architecture, then – Ed*), and Lucas himself oversaw nearly every aspect of the design. Inside, it's much the same, with beautiful collections of books lining the walls and gorgeous everything everywhere.

Others magazine correspondents are there, wanting a look at the new DVD. It's an international crowd, and everyone's talking about anything but official Lucas business—how long their flight/drive/sleigh ride was, where the muffins are, etc. Some are struggling to figure out the name of the *Star Wars* character on their name tag so they don't miss their tour group; considering that the options are C-3PO, R2-D2 and Darth Maul, I'm wondering how some of these people got in here in the first place.

But the tour is well worth

the time it takes them to get themselves together, I'm quite sure. We go right through Lucas' personal conference room, where he talks to the heads of his various companies every week, then to the amazing research library which holds Lucasfilm's archive materials along with the new additions they picked up when Universal and Paramount sold them their entire collections.

When not doing background checks on one of its own productions, Lucasfilm has a sideline researching various subjects for other movie-makers looking for that extra bit of authenticity. About this time someone asks if Lucas himself lives here, which he doesn't, although his own house is apparently not too far away and built in the same style. Soon we're shuffled off into a screening room with seats more comfortable than my bed.

By lunch, almost the *only* thing anyone can talk about is a) the DVD or b) how they want to run away from home to join Lucasfilm, which is admittedly quite a few steps up from the circus. The other hot topic of conversation is that so-and-so heard that they're editing *Episode Two* one floor down/above/over the corridor from the room we were just in. The fact that we're asked to be considerate of people who are "working" nearby gets a couple of people into a lather. Working? On what? I'm willing to bet that whatever it is, a chunk of it is worth a thousand bucks on eBay ... but that kind of thinking leads to *The Dark Side*.

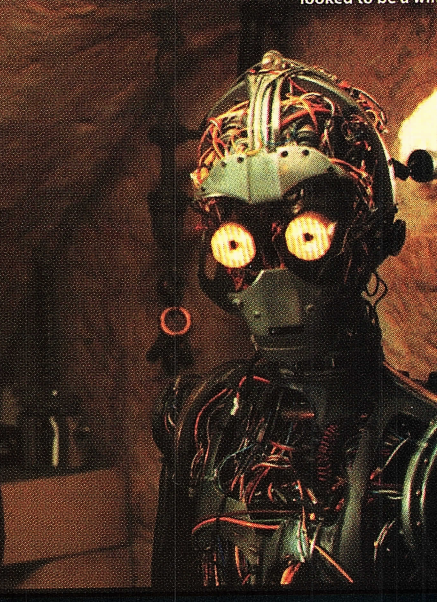
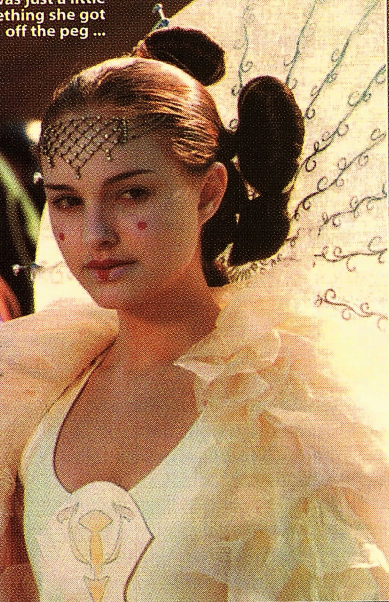
After lunch, we get to chat with Lucasfilm's heavy hitters – *Phantom Menace* producer Rick McCallum, several of the folks involved in the production of the DVD, and Lucas himself. McCallum is gung-ho, upbeat and very funny. Lucas is so dry I can't tell whether he's being sarcastic or not sometimes. Overall, I get the impression that he's about as serious as they come, and very serious about the *Star Wars* saga – accusations that flew after *Phantom Menace* that he's only in it for the money seem ridiculous when you witness how much time and thought he spends just on a question about what order it's best to watch the movies in, finally suggesting that everyone will have to decide for themselves.

Far from being frazzled by all the expectations for this DVD, George Lucas seems like he's prepared for anything. He looks like a guy who doesn't mind having the storm swirl around him. He looks – unlike the hyperactive, muffin-grubbing geeks who've invaded his hideout – like he belongs here.

Steve Palopoli



"LUCAS LOOKS LIKE A GUY WHO DOESN'T MIND HAVING THE STORM SWIRL AROUND HIM"



DID YOU KNOW?

■ Ewan McGregor kept making light saber noises as he duelled. They later had to be dubbed out.

→ me to imagine greater things, it's fantastic in terms of the creative side of it. But, along with being able to imagine greater things, comes the obligation to deal with all those thing that you've imagined. Which means that there's a lot more work involved. So it's a kind of double-edged sword."

Committing to creating the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy was no small decision. The first three were such a success, and the new project would take so much effort, it's not surprising that Lucas took as long as he did to commit to new episodes.

To trilogy, or not to trilogy

"That was something I debated for quite awhile. And it was a number of years, about 15 years that I took off to do other things. And I thought long and hard whether I wanted to commit another 10 years of my life doing another trilogy. And I felt at the time that there were interesting

aspects about how Darth Vader became Darth Vader, that it was a strong enough story that it would be worth telling. I think it's got some interesting aspects to it that illuminate what happens in the *Episodes IV, V and VI*. So the idea of completing it and having *Episodes I-VI* was an allure I couldn't avoid."

The millions of *Star Wars* fans are a social phenomenon unto themselves, devouring each new piece of official merchandise, and building their own expectations of what *Star Wars* should be. But Lucas never lets this buzz interfere with his vision.

"It's great that the fans love the film and I'm appreciative that we have a good base of people that like the movies, but ultimately I have to go ahead and just make the movies that I want to make. And make them the way I want to make them. And you know, nobody is always going to be

happy about everything.

"So we get a certain amount of people talking about stuff on everything we do. I can't really be bothered with it. I have to kind of just make the movie as I see it, and make it for my own enjoyment and hope that other people like it. And hope that they feel that it was an entertaining adventure for them."

The introduction of virtual actors like Jar-Jar in recent years has evoked controversy, but there's still no such thing as an artificial performance. Living on the razor's edge of special effects, Lucas should know.

"Acting is acting. Most of the discussion on virtual actors at this point is a discussion by people that don't know anything about acting. And they don't know that there's a craft and there's a talent, and there is no such thing as a virtual actor. All actors are real, they're all flesh and blood. That's why it's such a ridiculous debate.

"There is such a thing as performance. You just can't make

a lifelike figure and say 'Well this is going to work.' Because it doesn't. It never will. And the computer can't do that. Until you have real good artificial intelligence, that's quirky, like humans are, you're never going to get that to happen. And it definitely will not happen in our lifetime."

Millions of *Star Wars* fans have fond memories of the original trilogy, but when they saw *The Phantom Menace* for the first time in 1999 they received a shock. Gone was their sense of wonder, and in its place the suspicion that they were watching a kid's movie.

The bumbling Jar-Jar and the precocious Anakin were not, by and large, characters that 20 and 30 somethings wanted to sympathise with: they felt cheated! But if you do the maths, you realise that it's the viewers who have changed, not the movies themselves.

"The films are primarily for children. I've never changed it. They've always been targeted pretty much for the same audience. The fact that adults like it is a plus. The widest audience is really for young people. It always has been. When you look at all the hit movies that have ever been made they're all for young people. You know old people don't go to the movies. They aren't the market. They never will be. So what you do is make something that's age appropriate and you try to make it intelligent. As a result it's worked for everybody in all ages."

A symphony of Star Wars

Another banal line of criticism that has been laid against the *Star Wars* movies is that they are too similar to each other. This similarity is, of course, intentional. When describing how the films fit together, Lucas often describes them as being part of a larger unified work, like a symphony.

"I don't look at this as a bunch of different movies. I look at this as one 12-hour movie that I'm trying to get finished. Even though it's taking me 30 years to do it, it's really just a six-part movie, a mini-series if you would. So I'm trying to keep it all consistent, exactly the same, all using all the same rules that I've concocted for myself in terms of the style and the way it

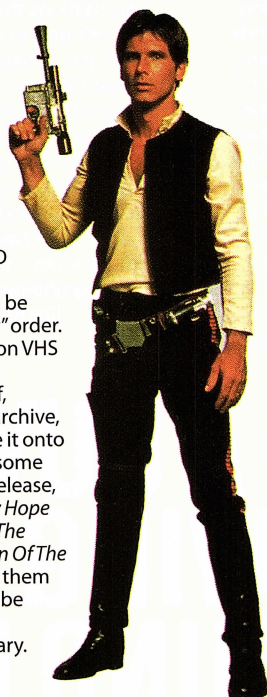
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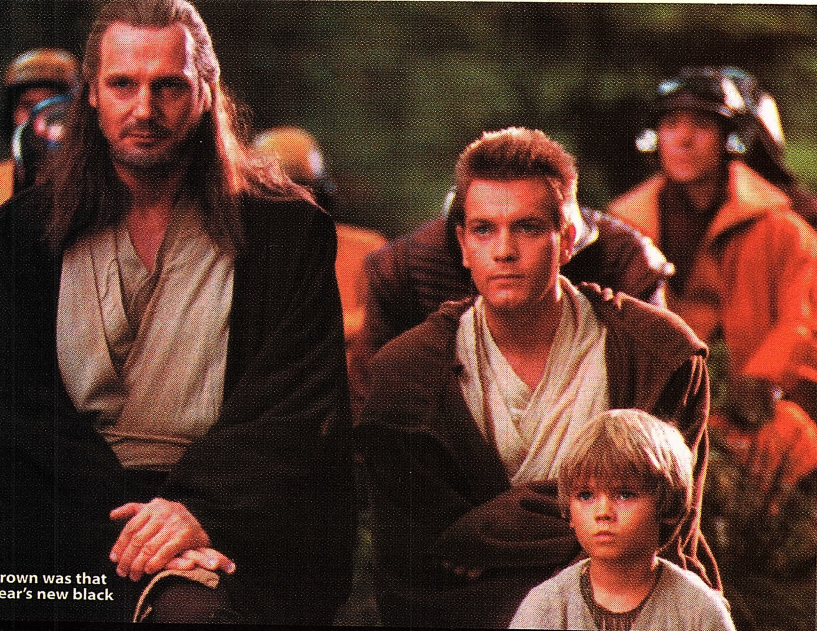
That question that everyone's dying to ask ...

What about the original three *Star Wars* films? When will they be out on DVD?

Um ... not yet. The official line from Lucasfilm is that they do not intend to release *Star Wars 4-6* (the first three films that were made) on DVD until after the completion of *Episodes 2 and 3*, so they can be released in "story chronology" order.

The stunning limited edition VHS tin from a few years ago was packed with every Making Of, trailer and snippet from the archive, so these at least should make it onto the DVDs. And as Lucas lent some larynx time to the *Phantom* release, we hope he'll do so for *A New Hope* (as *Star Wars* is now known), *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return Of The Jedi*. What would really make them complete is if the stars could be persuaded to sit in a studio together and do a commentary. We can but dream for now.





rown was that
ear's new black



The Making Of...

Feeling green around
the gills ...



"Whoosh! Whoosh!"

"I look at this as one 12 hour long movie" George Lucas

works together and everything, so that it'll look like one seamless piece and you can watch it from *Episode I* to *Episode VI*."

Today's filmmaker can collate behind-the-scenes material knowing full well that it will be used on a future DVD release. So the question naturally arises as to whether the original trilogy will stand up on this new medium.

"Well I hope so. For the first three movies it'll be much harder to put together a comprehensive package the way we did on *Episode I*. That's why we're spending more time on it. We didn't shoot much behind the scenes material, and you know a lot of the material that we would normally include just didn't exist in those days. Again this was a long time ago. This was before even VHS, if you remember back that far. So you know trying to put together something that has the kind of quality that this has is a greater challenge."

Even assuming that when all six movies

are complete they'll be available on DVD, say around 2005, the typical home cinema buff will still have a quandary on his hands. In a typical marathon viewing, what order should one watch them in?

Beginning at the beginning

After all, knowing that Anakin Skywalker is Darth Vader puts a whole different spin on episodes IV through VI. Would watching the films in the order they were created make more sense, even though they're technically out of sequence?

"Well I don't know what will be the best way. You know I think everybody will look at that differently. There's a whole generation that's looked at it as a flashback sequence, what I'm doing now. Kids in the future when they see it probably will see it through VI. The experience for them will be different because the times we live in are different, their experiences are different."

"Obviously when *Star Wars* came out

there was nothing at all like it. I mean it was completely unique. Now every year there's at least five or six versions of this kind of movie that come out. So that the experience isn't quite as novel as it was, and I think then people will follow the story more and be more interested in the story.

"You now know how Vader got to be what he is. And you know what his struggle has been. And you have a little bit more emotional investment in what Luke is doing. When you see it the other way around you don't feel it that much. He's just he villain, he's the bad guy and that's it."

The sheer quality of *Episode One* on DVD should quell any fears that *Star Wars* fans may have about Lucas' dedication to the format. It may seem a miracle that studios adopted DVD at all, given its potential to sap viewers away from the big screen. But a simple look at human psychology puts any such fears to bed.

"I think the biggest difference between a theatrical experience and a home experience is that a theatrical experience is a group experience," Lucas says.

"It's a social experience and that's why people go. That's why people still go to the ballet, the opera, the symphony. They go to a lot of things that in theory should have died out years ago. That is what the cinema brings you. It also brings you a bigger experience, a taller screen.

Backing DVD 100 per cent

"Now with digital, it will have the same quality experience that you get at home now. The home experience gives you a chance to review things, to stop things, to study things. It's a different kind of thing and you have a richer experience that way. I don't see them as competing with each other at all. I think of them as helping each other to form a complete experience."

Lucasfilm is behind DVD 100 per cent, and in the coming years we can expect the most loved movie series of all time to morph into the centrepiece of our DVD collections. George has spoken: The Force is with us for good! ■